

Forced displacement trends in the last 20 years

Target Audience: International organisation working closely with UNHCR in providing support to refugees worldwide. The organisation is interested in a short report for their board to inform them of the key forced displacement events and key host countries in the last 20 years. It is assumed that the audience is familiar with the UNHCR categories of displaced groups (refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, stateless persons, Venezuelans displaced abroad, others of concern)

Evita Kourtza

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1 Introduction

This report draws on data from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and explores the trends of forcibly displaced populations globally over the last 20 years including major displacement events and trends of asylum applications. The study tries to answer the following questions:

- What are some of the largest population displacement events in the last 20 years?
- Which countries have been the largest hosts of asylum seekers in the last 20 years?
- What has been the impact of Covid-19 in people displaced and asylum applications?

2 Background and context

2.1 Background

UNHCR is the UN's refugee agency, a global organisation with the mandate to help and protect refugees, forcibly displaced people and stateless people. UNHCR's primary purpose is to *"safeguard the rights and well-being of people who have been forced to flee"*¹.

People of concern to UNHCR² are: refugees (under UNHCR's mandate), asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless people, Venezuelans displaced abroad and others of concern (this includes people not included in other categories but under the protection of UNHCR).



UNHCR holds statistical data on displaced populations covering all categories. It started collecting data on refugee populations in 1951, and consequently added data on more population types in the following years, as data became available. More specifically, UNHCR started collecting and publishing data on asylum seekers in 2000, IDPs in 1993, stateless people in 2004, Venezuelans displaced abroad in 2018 and others of concern in 1997³.

UNHCR collects data through governmental agencies, UNHCR country offices and NGOs. Data are collected mainly through censuses, refugee registers and surveys. Apart from population statistics, UNHCR also holds data on solutions for displaced populations such as repatriation or resettlement, and tracks asylum applications and decisions.

2.2 Data and limitations

This study focused on analysing UNHCR statistical data on displaced populations and asylum applications. It focused on the period 2000-2020 and used information from two UNHCR data sets:

1. Populations: yearly statistics on the number of people being displaced, including all previously mentioned categories. Data are reported as end-of-year population figures.
2. Applications: yearly statistics on the number of asylum applications by country of origin and country of asylum. Data include applications submitted within a specific year.

As previously mentioned, the study focused on the last 20 year period as the overall statistical data were more comprehensive after 2000. It is important to note that UNHCR data mainly focus on the number of people forcibly displaced, without giving any information on the reason for displacement.

UNHCR relies on statistics available by individual governments. However, not all governments recognise refugee status or use the same definitions for displaced populations as UNHCR. This holds the risk of underreporting figures for some nations. In addition, there are some countries where there are no government figures. For these countries, UNHCR estimates refugee populations using assumptions based on asylum seeker numbers, which are not always representative.

Data on people being displaced and asylum applications are recorded by origin and host country. The analysis looks at key countries and groups data by continent. As some country borders and country names have changed over time, small discrepancies are expected in yearly trends.

¹<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/who-we-help.html>

²<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/definition/>

³<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/>

Finally, this study has been limited to analysing statistical information on displaced populations available from UNHCR. It hasn't used demographics data or displacement data collected from other organisations (e.g. Palestine refugee statistics from UNRWA). Also, the study hasn't used any other world data sets in combination with the UNHCR statistics (e.g. country economic data, country population data).

3 Findings

3.1 Major displacement events in the last 20 years

Looking at the overall population being displaced every year for the last 20 years (Figure 1), there are some specific years that jump out because of the increase in people being displaced.

2006 saw a 55.8% increase in people being displaced. One of the reasons was the ongoing Iraq war which led to 1.8 million displaced internally and 1.5 million people fleeing Iraq by the end of 2006. Colombia was the 2nd country with the largest population of IDPs - 3 million people - most likely due to the continuing internal conflict. 2006 also saw 3 million stateless people looking for asylum in Nepal.

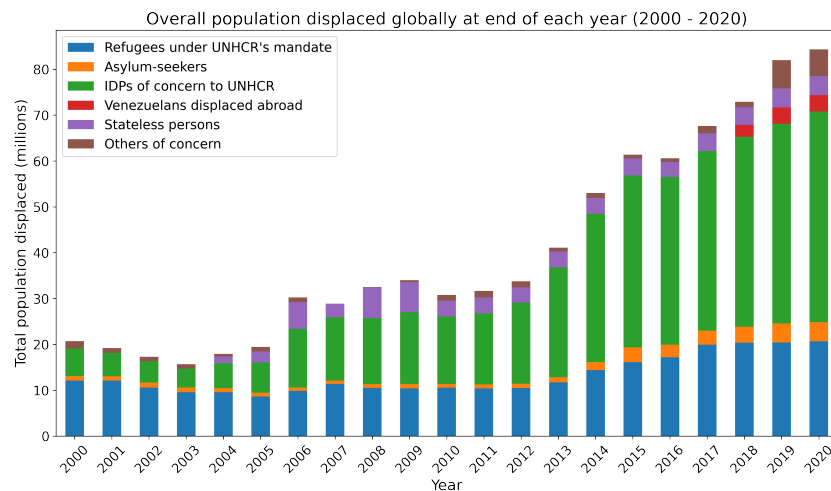


Figure 1: Global overall population displacement in each year from 2000 to 2020

Venezuelans displaced abroad in 2018 by country of asylum

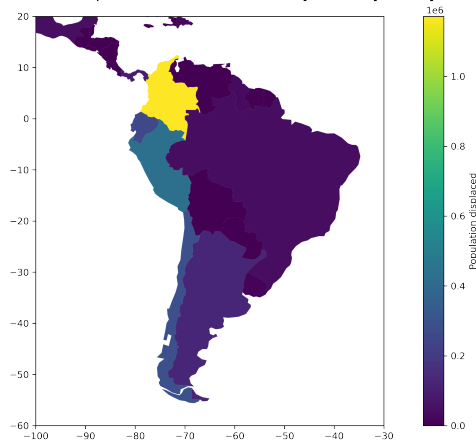


Figure 2: Venezuelans displaced abroad in 2018 by country of asylum

In 2018 there were 2.6 million Venezuelans displaced abroad. The ongoing socioeconomic and political crisis led to many people fleeing the country and seeking asylum to neighbouring countries. In 2018 there were 460 thousand Venezuelan asylum seekers, a more than 200% increase since 2017. Figure 2 shows the host countries where most Venezuelans displaced abroad were seeking asylum. The majority sought asylum in Colombia but also in Peru and Ecuador. It is important to note that UNHCR started recording Venezuelans seeking asylum and in need of international protection in 2018 as a separate category in their data.

2013 and 2014 were years of significant internal displacement, with 24 million and 32 million IDPs respectively. Middle East, Latin

America and Central Africa were the three geographical centres with most internal displacement as shown on the map in Figure 3.

In the Middle East the main displacement situations included the Syrian war, which continued and escalated in 2013, and the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Latin America, the internal fighting and political violence in Colombia was the main reason for displacement. Finally, several sources of new and continued violence were happening in 2013 and 2014 in Africa. In the Democratic Republic of Congo violent unrest started in 2013 leading to thousands being displaced. In the end of 2013 the South Sudanese civil war started, which brought a lot of violence and uncertainty for Sudanese people. In addition, other ongoing conflicts in Africa with the Somali war being one of the hardest also led to ongoing and unresolved displacement situations during those years.

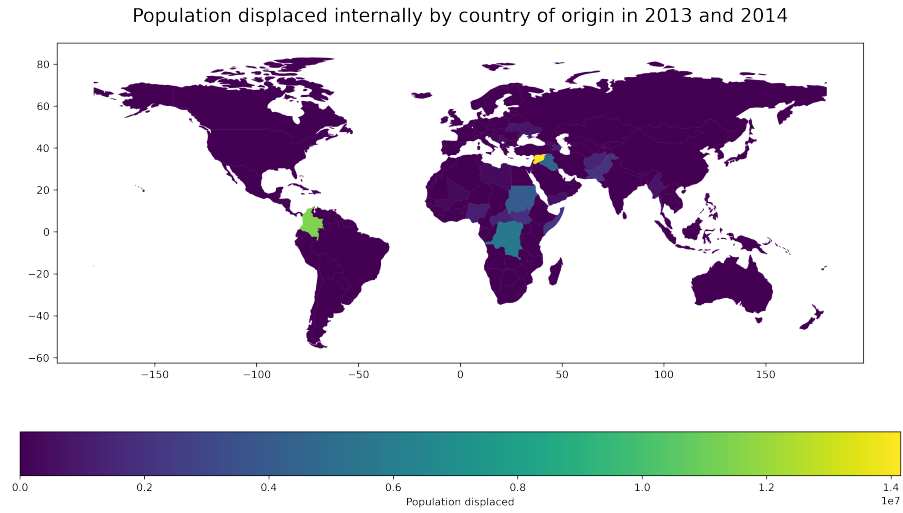


Figure 3: Overall population displaced internally by country of origin (2013 and 2014)

3.2 Key host countries in the last 20 years

Looking at the yearly asylum applications since 2000 (Figure 4), we see that **Europe has generally been the most common destination for asylum applications across this time period.**

Africa and Asia have had the fewest applications across the years with some notable exceptions. In 2000 there were 255 thousand applications from Afghanistan to Iran, which demonstrates the vast displacement impact of the war in Afghanistan that started in 2001. Similarly, in 2008 and 2009 there was a surge in applications in Africa. Key highlights were the crises in Zimbabwe and Eritrea forcing people to flee to neighbouring countries, South Africa and Ethiopia.

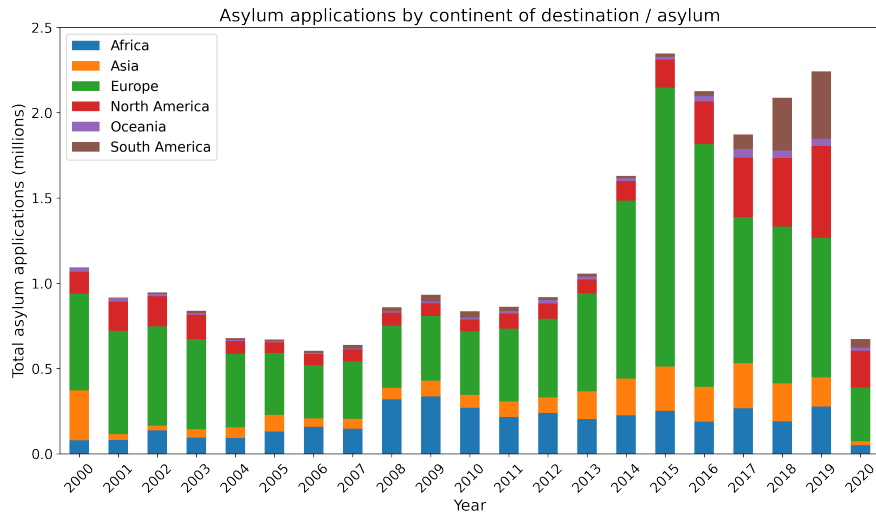


Figure 4: Asylum applications by continent of destination / asylum in each year from 2000 to 2020

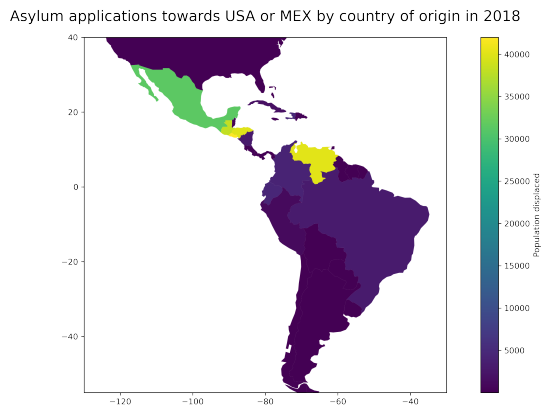


Figure 5: Asylum applications towards USA or MEX by country of origin in 2018

In 2015 and especially after 2017, asylum applications towards North American countries increased significantly. The main reason for that has been the rise in violence and socio-economic instability in Central America, with the majority of asylum applications originating from El Salvador, Venezuela, Guatemala and Mexico. Figure 5 shows the countries of origin for all asylum applications towards USA and Mexico in 2018.

Figure 4 also shows an increase in applications towards South America in 2018 and 2019. As previously mentioned in Section 3.1, 2018 was a year of major displacement in Venezuela with millions seeking asylum in neighboring countries.

Asylum applications show the most popular destination countries for people seeking asylum. In the rest of this section, we look at the key host countries for all categories of displaced people.

In 2020, five countries hosted 39.5% of the global overall population displaced abroad (including refugees, asylum seekers and Venezuelans displaced abroad).

As shown in Figure 6 Turkey was first, hosting 4 million people followed by Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda and Germany. Colombia stands out as the majority of people seeking asylum there were Venezuelans.

Since 2014 Turkey has been the top country of asylum for people displaced abroad globally. The war in Syria has been an important factor in this case with Turkey hosting the majority of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the country since 2014. Other major hosts of Syrian refugees since 2014 are: Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Germany and Egypt. Figure 7 shows the top host countries for Syrians displaced abroad in 2014 and in 2020.

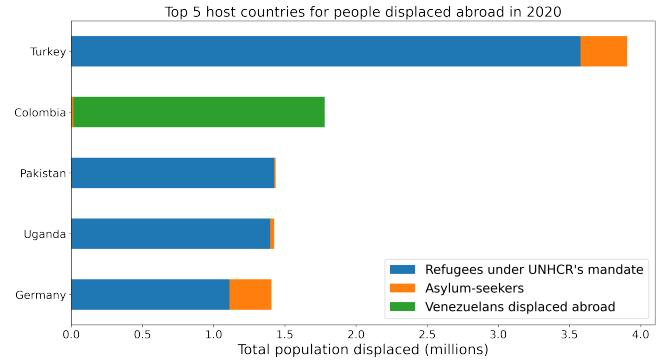


Figure 6: Top 5 host countries for people displaced abroad in 2020

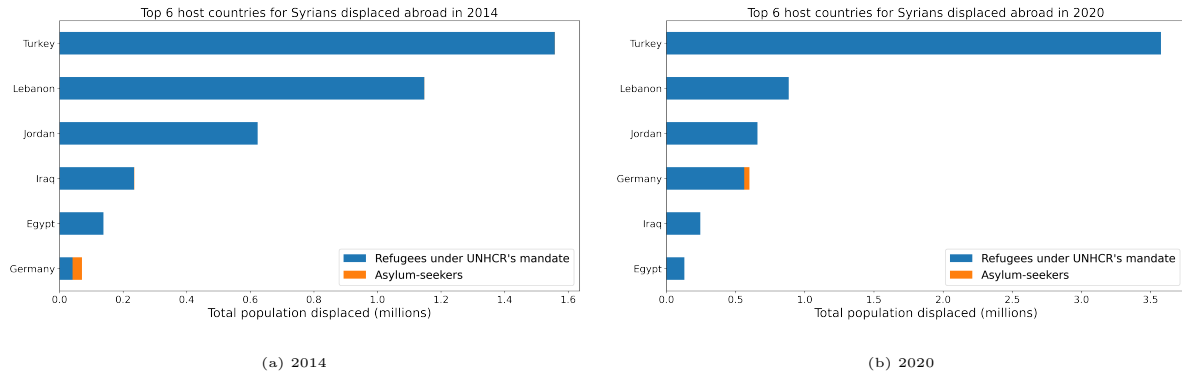


Figure 7: Top host countries for Syrians displaced abroad

In Europe, Germany stands out as one of the main countries of asylum for refugees and asylum seekers in the last 20 years. Germany hosted 1.4 million people displaced abroad in 2020, the majority with refugee status. Looking at the countries of origin for people seeking asylum in Germany, before 2013 most people originated from: Serbia and Kosovo, Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan. After 2013 and especially after 2014 and until now, most people seeking asylum in Germany are from Syria. This shows the scale of impact of the Syrian war in terms of displacement and people seeking asylum in Europe. This is clear also in Figure 8.

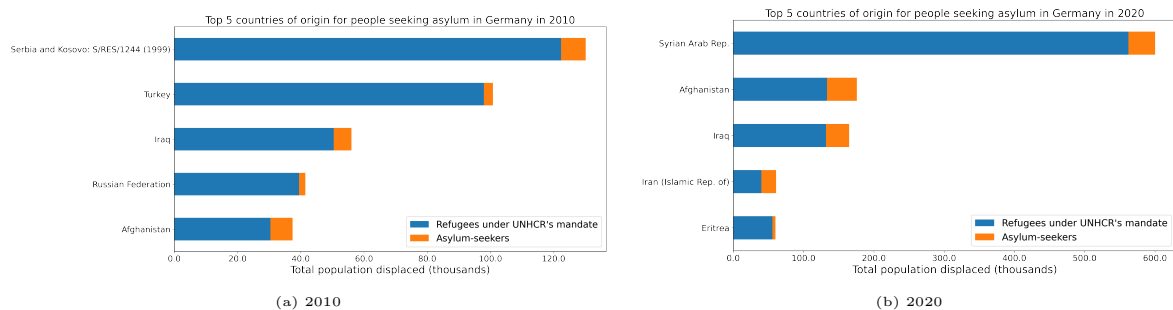


Figure 8: Top countries of origin for people seeking asylum in Germany in 2010 and 2020

3.3 Impact of Covid-19 on population displacement and asylum applications

The Covid-19 pandemic marked 2020 as a year with unforeseen disruptions across all aspects of life and particularly movement. Restrictions around the world in terms of mobility, the imposition of lockdowns and also the closure of borders had a significant impact on displaced populations. Figure 9 shows the trends of people displaced abroad and asylum applications in the last 4 years.

In 2020 asylum applications dropped by 70% and the population displaced abroad stayed almost flat. In the previous 3 years, the number of people displaced abroad grew by almost 10% on average each year. Similarly, the number of asylum applications grew by 9% on average each year since 2017. Although the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on refugees and asylum seekers is much more complex and difficult to determine, the drop in numbers shows a glimpse of the impact of border closures on forced displacement.

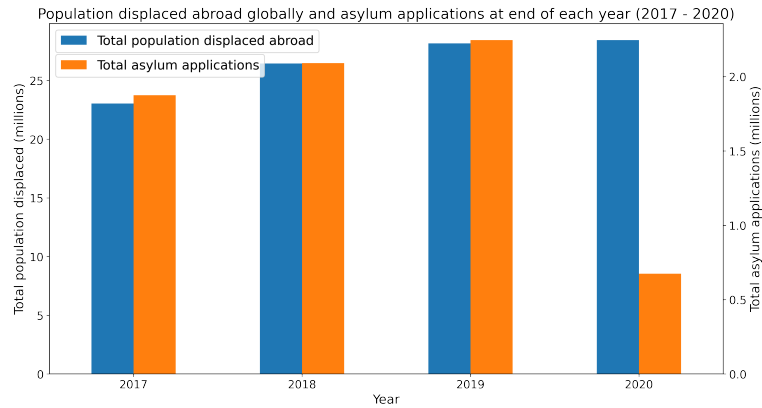


Figure 9: Population displaced abroad and asylum applications from 2017 to 2020

4 Summary and recommendations

In 2020 there were 84 million people forcibly displaced, 33% of which were people displaced abroad and 56% were people displaced internally within their country. The majority of people displaced abroad came from Syria and sought asylum in Turkey, whereas the majority of internally displaced people were from Colombia. 2020 saw a 1% increase in people displaced abroad, however asylum applications decreased by almost 70% due to border closures as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This report tried to uncover key trends in population displacement in the last 20 years using data available from UNHCR in terms of numbers of people displaced each year and asylum applications. The data from UNHCR allow for exploration of many different questions, and this report tried to focus on key insights from yearly trends without going into depth for specific displacement situations. Our recommendations are therefore focused on how the data and their exploration could be improved.

- **Any analysis of UNHCR data needs to explore the context behind the statistical insights.** This study tried to look for the most likely explanations behind yearly figures and examine the reasons behind changes from one year to the next. Also, some of the insights discussed in this study looked at displacements with regards to country of origin or host country. Geographical analysis can offer one further step of analysis and put numbers in clearer context.
- **UNHCR data could be improved with more information on the most probable reason for displacement.** Currently, UNHCR only provides yearly displacement figures with no background information. This could be improved if, for example, each datapoint related to the number of people displaced was complemented with a comment on the most likely justification for displacement. This could help track the most common displacement causes and when combined with countries of origin, it could uncover the impact of regional conflicts. This could also help in understanding other causes of forced displaced, such as natural disasters and climate change.
- **The results from this study on key host countries could be improved by comparing host countries according to their income level.** This could provide further insights in terms of whether high-income and low-income economies share the burden of asylum seekers and refugees or if there are any disproportions in the number of asylum seekers being hosted by low-income countries. This could be done by using data from the World Bank on country economy data⁴.
- **Data on stateless people are poor and therefore need to be examined separately to draw meaningful insights.** According to UNHCR, statelessness can occur for many reasons including discrimination against particular ethnic or religious groups or gaps in nationality laws⁵. This makes it particularly difficult to collect information. We recommend that statistics on stateless people are looked separately for specific years of major displacement and with a focus on identifying: the groups of people included in the numbers, reasons for statelessness and reasons for displacement.

⁴<https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups%20>

⁵<https://www.unhcr.org/ending-statelessness.html>